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THE HARLOT'S HOUSE

AND OTHER POEMS

JOHN VASSOS *has also illustrated*

SALÔME

*and*

THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

*by*

OSCAR WILDE

AND IS THE CREATOR OF CONTEMPO

*Published by* E. P. DUTTON & Co., INC.







# THE HARLOT'S HOUSE

## AND OTHER POEMS

BY OSCAR WILDE

INTERPRETATIONS BY  
JOHN VASSOS



NEW YORK    E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.    MCMXXIX

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FOR JOHN MACRAE.

J. V.



## THE HARLOT'S HOUSE

WE caught the tread of dancing feet,  
We loitered down the moonlit street,  
And stopped beneath the harlot's house.

Inside, above the din and fray,  
We heard the loud musicians play  
The "Treues Liébes Herz" of Strauss.

Like strange mechanical grotesques,  
Making fantastic arabesques,  
The shadows raced across the blind.

We watched the ghostly dancers spin  
To sound of horn and violin,  
Like black leaves wheeling in the wind.

Like wire-pulled automatons,  
Slim silhouetted skeletons  
Went sidling through the slow quadrille.

They took each other by the hand,  
And danced a stately saraband;  
Their laughter echoed thin and shrill.



Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed  
A phantom lover to her breast,  
Sometimes they seemed to try to sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette  
Came out, and smoked its cigarette  
Upon the steps like a live thing.

Then, turning to my love, I said,  
“The dead are dancing with the dead,  
The dust is whirling with the dust.”

But she—she heard the violin,  
And left my side, and entered in:  
Love passed into the house of lust.

Then suddenly the tune went false,  
The dancers wearied of the waltz,  
The shadows ceased to wheel and whirl.

And down the long and silent street,  
The dawn, with silver-sandalled feet,  
Crept like a frightened girl.



REQUIESCAT





## REQUIESCAT

TREAD lightly, she is near  
Under the snow,  
Speak gently, she can hear  
The daisies grow.

All her bright golden hair  
Tarnished with rust,  
She that was young and fair  
Fallen to dust.

Lily-like, white as snow,  
She hardly knew  
She was a woman, so  
Sweetly she grew.

Coffin-board, heavy stone,  
Lie on her breast,  
I vex my heart alone,  
She is at rest.

Peace, Peace, she cannot hear  
Lyre or sonnet,  
All my life's buried here,  
Heap earth upon it.

AVIGNON.





MADONNA MIA





## MADONNA MIA

A Lily-Girl, not made for this world's pain,  
With brown, soft hair close braided by her ears,  
And longing eyes half veiled by slumberous tears  
Like bluest water seen through mists of rain:  
Pale cheeks whereon no love hath left its stain,  
Red underlip drawn in for fear of love,  
And white throat, whiter than the silvered dove,  
Through whose wan marble creeps one purple vein.  
Yet, though my lips shall praise her without cease,  
Even to kiss her feet I am not bold,  
Being o'ershadowed by the wings of awe,  
Like Dante, when he stood with Beatrice  
Beneath the flaming Lion's breast, and saw  
The seventh Crystal, and the Stair of Gold.

I

LE PANNEAU

UNDER the rose-tree's dancing shade  
There stands a little ivory girl,  
Pulling the leaves of pink and pearl  
With pale green nails of polished jade.

The red leaves fall upon the mould,  
The white leaves flutter, one by one,  
Down to a blue bowl where the sun,  
Like a great dragon, writhes in gold.

The white leaves float upon the air,  
The red leaves flutter idly down,  
Some fall upon her yellow gown,  
And some upon her raven hair.

She takes an amber lute and sings,  
And as she sings a silver crane  
Begins his scarlet neck to strain,  
And flap his burnished metal wings.

She takes a lute of amber bright,  
And from the thicket where he lies  
Her lover, with his almond eyes,  
Watches her movement in delight.

And now she gives a cry of fear,  
And tiny tears begin to start:  
A thorn has wounded with its dart  
The pink-veined sea-shell of her ear.

And now she laughs a merry note:  
There has fallen a petal of the rose  
Just where the yellow satin shows  
The blue-veined flower of her throat.

With pale green nails of polished jade,  
Pulling the leaves of pink and pearl,  
There stands a little ivory girl  
Under the rose-tree's dancing shade.





## LE PANNEAU





## PANTHEA

NAY, let us walk from fire unto fire,  
From passionate pain to deadlier delight,—  
I am too young to live without desire,  
Too young art thou to waste this summer night  
Asking those idle questions which of old  
Man sought of seer and oracle, and no reply  
was told.

For, sweet, to feel is better than to know,  
And wisdom is a childless heritage,  
One pulse of passion—youth's first fiery glow,—  
Are worth the hoarded proverbs of the sage:  
Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy,  
Have we not lips to kiss with, hearts to love, and  
eyes to see!

Dost thou not hear the murmuring nightingale  
Like water bubbling from a silver jar,  
So soft she sings the envious moon is pale,  
That high in heaven she is hung so far  
She cannot hear that love-enraptured tune,—  
Mark how she wreathes each horn with mist,  
yon late and labouring moon.

White lilies, in whose cups the gold bees dream,  
The fallen snow of petals where the breeze  
Scatters the chestnut blossom, or the gleam  
Of boyish limbs in water,—are not these  
Enough for thee, dost thou desire more?  
Alas! the Gods will give nought else from their  
eternal store.

For our high Gods have sick and wearied grown  
Of all our endless sins, our vain endeavour  
For wasted days of youth to make atone  
By pain or prayer or priest, and never, never,  
Hearken they now to either good or ill,  
But send their rain upon the just and the unjust  
at will.

They sit at ease, our Gods they sit at ease,  
    Strewing with leaves of rose their scented wine,  
They sleep, they sleep, beneath the rocking trees  
    Where asphodel and yellow lotus twine,  
Mourning the old glad days before they knew  
What evil things the heart of man could dream,  
    and dreaming do.

And far beneath the brazen floor they see  
    Like swarming flies the crowd of little men,  
The bustle of small lives, then wearily  
    Back to their lotus-haunts they turn again  
Kissing each other's mouths, and mix more deep  
The poppy-seeded draught which brings soft  
    purple-lidded sleep.

There all day long the golden-vestured sun,  
    Their torch-bearer, stands with his torch a-blaze,  
And, when the gaudy web of noon is spun  
    By its twelve maidens, through the crimson haze  
Fresh from Endymion's arms comes forth the moon.  
And the immortal Gods in toils of mortal passions  
    swoon.

There walks Queen Juno through some dewy mead  
Her grand white feet flecked with the saffron dust  
Of wind-stirred lilies, while young Ganymede  
Leaps in the hot and amber-foaming must,  
His curls all tossed, as when the eagle bare  
The frightened boy from Ida through the blue  
Ionian air.

There in the green heart of some garden close  
Queen Venus with the shepherd at her side,  
Her warm soft body like the briar rose  
Which would be white yet blushes at its pride,  
Laughs low for love, till jealous Salmacis  
Peers through the myrtle-leaves and sighs for  
pain of lonely bliss.

There never does that dreary north-wind blow  
Which leaves our English forests bleak and bare,  
Nor ever falls the swift white-feathered snow,  
Nor ever doth the red-toothed lightning dare  
To wake them in the silver-fretted night  
When we lie weeping for some sweet sad sin,  
some dead delight.





PANTHEA





Alas! they know the far Lethæan spring,  
The violet-hidden waters well they know,  
Where one whose feet with tired wandering  
Are faint and broken may take heart and go,  
And from those dark depths cool and crystalline  
Drink, and draw balm, and sleep for sleepless souls,  
and anodyne.

But we oppress our natures, God or Fate  
Is our enemy, we starve and feed  
On vain repentance—O we are born too late!  
What balm for us in bruised poppy seed  
Who crowd into one finite pulse of time  
The joy of infinite love and the fierce pain of  
infinite crime.

O we are wearied of this sense of guilt,  
Wearied of pleasure's paramour despair,  
Wearied of every temple we have built,  
Wearied of every right, unanswered prayer,  
For man is weak; God sleeps: and heaven is high:  
One fiery-coloured moment: one great love; and  
lo! we die.

Ah! but no ferry-man with labouring pole  
Nears his black shallop to the flowerless strand,  
No little coin of bronze can bring the soul  
Over Death's river to the sunless land,  
Victim and wine and vow are all in vain,  
The tomb is sealed; the soldiers watch; the dead  
rise not again.

We are resolved into the supreme air,  
We are made one with what we touch and see,  
With our heart's blood each crimson sun is fair,  
With our young lives each spring-impassioned tree  
Flames into green, the wildest beasts that range  
The moor our kinsmen are, all life is one, and  
all is change.

With beat of systole and of diastole  
One grand great life throbs through earth's  
giant heart,  
And mighty waves of single Being roll  
From nerveless germ to man, for we are part  
Of every rock and bird and beast and hill,  
One with the things that prey on us, and one  
with what we kill.

From lower cells of waking life we pass  
To full perfection; thus the world grows old:  
We who are godlike now were once a mass  
Of quivering purple flecked with bars of gold,  
Unsentient or of joy or misery,  
And tossed in terrible tangles of some wild and  
wind-swept sea.

This hot hard flame with which our bodies burn  
Will make some meadow blaze with daffodil,  
Ay! and those argent breasts of thine will turn  
To water-lilies; the brown fields men till  
Will be more fruitful for our love to-night,  
Nothing is lost in nature, all things live in Death's  
despite.

The boy's first kiss, the hyacinth's first bell,  
The man's last passion, and the last red spear  
That from the lily leaps, the asphodel  
Which will not let its blossoms blow for fear  
Of too much beauty, and the timid shame  
Of the young bride-groom at his lover's eyes,—  
these with the same

One sacrament are consecrate, the earth  
Not we alone hath passions hymeneal,  
The yellow buttercups that shake for mirth  
At daybreak know a pleasure not less real  
Than we do, when in some fresh blossoming wood,  
We draw the spring into our hearts, and feel  
that life is good.

So when men bury us beneath the yew  
Thy crimson-stained mouth a rose will be,  
And thy soft eyes lush bluebells dimmed with dew,  
And when the white narcissus wantonly  
Kisses the wind its playmate some faint joy  
Will thrill our dust, and we will be again fond  
maid and boy.

And thus without life's conscious torturing pain  
In some sweet flower we will feel the sun,  
And from the linnet's throat will sing again,  
And as two gorgeous-mailed snakes will run  
Over our graves, or as two tigers creep  
Through the hot jungle where the yellow-eyed  
huge lions sleep



And give them battle! How my heart leaps up  
To think of that grand living after death  
In beast and bird and flower, when this cup,  
Being filled too full of spirits, bursts for breath,  
And with the pale leaves of some autumn day  
The soul earth's earliest conqueror becomes  
earth's last great prey.

O think of it! We shall inform ourselves  
Into all sensuous life, the goat-foot Faun,  
The Centaur, or the merry bright-eyed Elves  
That leave their dancing rings to spite the dawn  
Upon the meadows, shall not be more near  
Than you and I to nature's mysteries, for we  
shall hear

The thrush's heart beat, and the daisies grow,  
And the wan snowdrop sighing for the sun  
On sunless days in winter, we shall know  
By whom the silver gossamer is spun,  
Who paints the diapered fritillaries,  
On what wide wings from shivering pine to pine  
the eagle flies.

Ay! had we never loved at all, who knows  
If yonder daffodil had lured the bee  
Into its gilded womb, or any rose  
Had hung with crimson lamps its little tree!  
Methinks no leaf would ever bud in spring,  
But for the lovers' lips that kiss, the poets' lips  
that sing.

Is the light vanished from our golden sun,  
Or is this dædal-fashioned earth less fair,  
That we are nature's heritors, and one  
With every pulse of life that beats the air?  
Rather new suns across the sky shall pass,  
New splendour come unto the flower, new  
glory to the grass.

And we two lovers shall not sit afar,  
Critics of nature, but the joyous sea  
Shall be our raiment, and the bearded star  
Shoot arrows at our pleasure! We shall be  
Part of the mighty universal whole,  
And through all æons mix and mingle with the  
Kosmic Soul!

We shall be notes in that great Symphony  
Whose cadence circles through the rhythmic  
spheres,  
And all the live World's throbbing heart shall be  
One with our heart, the stealthy creeping years  
Have lost their terrors now, we shall not die,  
The Universe itself shall be our Immortality!

## LIBERTATIS SACRA FAMES

ALBEIT nurtured in democracy,  
And liking best that state republican  
Where every man is Kinglike and no man  
Is crowned above his fellows, yet I see,  
Spite of this modern fret for Liberty,  
Better the rule of One, whom all obey,  
Than to let clamorous demagogues betray  
Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy.  
Wherefore I love them not whose hands profane  
Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street  
For no right cause, beneath whose ignorant reign  
Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all things fade,  
Save treason and the dagger of her trade,  
Or Murder with his silent bloody feet.



LIBERTATIS SACRA FAMES







## ATHANASIA

TO that gaunt House of Art which lacks for naught  
Of all the great things men have saved from Time,  
The withered body of a girl was brought  
Dead ere the world's glad youth had touched its prime,  
And seen by lonely Arabs lying hid  
In the dim womb of some black pyramid.

But when they had unloosed the linen band  
Which swathed the Egyptian's body,—lo! was found  
Closed in the wasted hollow of her hand  
A little seed, which sown in English ground  
Did wondrous snow of starry blossoms bear,  
And spread rich odours through our springtide air.

With such strange arts this flower did allure  
That all forgotten was the asphodel,  
And the brown bee, the lily's paramour,  
Forsook the cup where he was wont to dwell,  
For not a thing of earth it seemed to be,  
But stolen from some heavenly Arcady.

In vain the sad narcissus, wan and white  
At its own beauty, hung across the stream,  
The purple dragon-fly had no delight  
With its gold dust to make his wings a-gleam,  
Ah! no delight the jasmine-bloom to kiss,  
Or brush the rain-pearls from the eucharis.

For love of it the passionate nightingale  
Forgot the hills of Thrace, the cruel king,  
And the pale dove no longer cared to sail  
Through the wet woods at time of blossoming,  
But round this flower of Egypt sought to float,  
With silvered wing and amethystine throat.



ATHANASIA





While the hot sun blazed in his tower of blue  
    A cooling wind crept from the land of snows,  
And the warm south with tender tears of dew  
    Drenched its white leaves when Hesperos uprose  
Amid those sea-green meadows of the sky  
On which the scarlet bars of sunset lie.

But when o'er wastes of lily-haunted field  
    The tired birds had stayed their amorous tune,  
And broad and glittering like an argent shield  
    High in the sapphire heavens hung the moon,  
Did no strange dream or evil memory make  
Each tremulous petal of its blossoms shake?

Ah no! to this bright flower a thousand years  
    Seemed but the lingering of a summer's day,  
It never knew the tide of cankering fears  
    Which turn a boy's gold hair to withered grey,  
The dread desire of death it never knew,  
Or how all folk that they were born must rue.

For we to death with pipe and dancing go,  
Nor would we pass the ivory gate again,  
As some sad river wearied of its flow  
Through the dull plains, the haunts of common men,  
Leaps lover-like into the terrible sea!  
And counts it gain to die so gloriously.

We mar our lordly strength in barren strife  
With the world's legions led by clamorous care,  
It never feels decay but gathers life  
From the pure sunlight and the supreme air,  
We live beneath Time's wasting sovereignty,  
It is the child of all eternity.





E TENEBRIS





## E TENEBRIS

COME, down, O Christ, and help me! reach thy hand,  
For I am drowning in a stormier sea  
Than Simon on thy lake of Galilee:  
The wine of life is spilt upon the sand,  
My heart is as some famine-murdered land  
Whence all good things have perished utterly,  
And well I know my soul in Hell must lie  
If I this night before God's throne should stand.  
"He sleeps perchance, or rideth to the chase,  
Like Baal, when his prophets howled that name  
From morn till noon on Carmel's smitten height.'  
Nay, peace, I shall behold before the night,  
The feet of brass, the robe more white than flame,  
The wounded hands, the weary human face.

## VITA NUOVA

I STOOD by the unvintageable sea  
Till the wet waves drenched face and hair with spray,  
The long red fires of the dying day  
Burned in the west; the wind piped drearily;  
And to the land the clamorous gulls did flee:  
“Alas!” I cried, “my life is full of pain,  
And who can garner fruit or golden grain,  
From these waste fields which travail ceaselessly!”  
My nets gaped wide with many a break and flaw  
Nathless I threw them as my final cast  
Into the sea, and waited for the end.  
When lo! a sudden glory! and I saw  
From the black waters of my tortured past  
The argent splendour of white limbs ascend!



VITA NUOVA







## CANZONET

I HAVE no store  
Of gryphon-guarded gold;  
Now, as before,  
Bare is the shepherd's fold.  
Rubies, nor pearls,  
Have I to gem thy throat;  
Yet woodland girls  
Have loved the shepherd's note.

Then, pluck a reed  
And bid me sing to thee,  
For I would feed  
Thine ears with melody,  
Who art more fair  
Than fairest fleur-de-lys,  
More sweet and rare  
Than sweetest ambergris.

What dost thou fear?  
Young Hyacinth is slain,  
Pan is not here,  
And will not come again.  
No horned Faun  
Treads down the yellow leas,  
No God at dawn  
Steals through the olive trees.

Hylas is dead,  
Nor will he e'er divine  
Those little red  
Rose-petalled lips of thine.  
On the high hill  
No ivory dryads play,  
Silver and still  
Sinks the sad autumn day.



CANZONET







I

LES SILHOUETTES

THE sea is flecked with bars of grey,  
The dull dead wind is out of tune,  
And like a withered leaf the moon  
Is blown across the stormy bay.

Etched clear upon the pallid sand  
Lies the black boat: a sailor boy  
Clambers aboard in careless joy  
With laughing face and gleaming hand.

And overhead the curlews cry,  
Where through the dusky upland grass  
The young brown-throated reapers pass  
Like silhouettes against the sky.



## LES SILHOUETTES





## IN THE FOREST

OUT of the mid-wood's twilight  
Into the meadow's dawn,  
Ivory limbed and brown-eyed,  
Flashes my Faun!

He skips through the copses singing,  
And his shadow dances along,  
And I know not which I should follow,  
Shadow or song!

O Hunter, snare me his shadow!  
O Nightingale, catch me his strain!  
Else moonstruck with music and madness  
I track him in vain!





IN THE FOREST





# CHORUS OF CLOUD MAIDENS

(Ἀριστοφάνους Νεφέλαι, 275-290, 298-313)

## ΣΤΡΟΦΗ

CLOUD maidens that float on for ever,  
Dew-sprinkled, fleet bodies, and fair,  
Let us rise from our Sire's loud river,  
Great Ocean, and soar through the air  
To the peaks of the pine-covered mountains where  
the pines hang as tresses of hair.  
Let us seek the watch-towers undaunted,  
Where the well-watered corn-fields abound,  
And through murmurs of river nymph-haunted  
The songs of the sea-waves resound;  
And the sun in the sky never wearies of spreading  
his radiance around  
Let us cast off the haze  
Of the mists from our band,  
Till with far-seeing gaze  
We may look on the land.

. . . . .

Cloud maidens that bring the rain-shower,  
 To the Pallas-loved land let us wing,  
 To the land of stout heroes and Power,  
 Where Kekrops was hero and king,  
 Where honour and silence is given  
 To the mysteries that none may declare,  
 Where are gifts to the high gods in heaven  
 When the house of the gods is laid bare,  
 Where are lofty roofed temples, and statues well  
     carven and fair;  
 Where are feasts to the happy immortals  
 When the sacred procession draws near,  
 Where garlands make bright the bright portals  
 At all seasons and months in the year;  
 And when spring days are here,  
 Then we tread to the wine-god a measure,  
 In Bacchanal dance and in pleasure,  
 'Mid the contests of sweet singing choirs,  
 And the crash of loud lyres.



ΘΡΗΝΩΙΔΙΑ







ΘΡΗΝΩΙΔΙΑ

O FAIR wind blowing from the sea!  
Who through the dark and mist dost guide  
The ships that on the billows ride,  
Unto what land, ah, misery!  
Shall I be borne, across what stormy wave,  
Or to whose house a purchased slave?

O sea-wind blowing fair and fast  
Is it unto the Dorian strand,  
Or to those far and fable shores,  
Where great Apidanus outpours  
His streams upon the fertile land,  
Or shall I tread the Phthian sand,  
Borne by the swift breath of the blast?  
O blowing wind! you bring my sorrow near,  
For surely borne with splashing of the oar,  
And hidden in some galley-prison drear

ANTIΣΤΡΟΦΗ

I shall be led unto that distant shore  
Where the tall palm-tree first took root, and made,  
With clustering laurel leaves, a pleasant shade  
For Leto when with travail great she bore  
A god and goddess in Love's bitter fight,  
Her body's anguish, and her soul's delight.

It may be in Delos,  
Encircled of seas,  
I shall sing with some maids  
From the Cyclades,  
Of Artemis goddess  
And queen and maiden,  
Sing of the gold  
In her hair heavy-laden.  
Sing of her hunting,  
Her arrows and bow,  
And in singing find solace  
From weeping and woe.

ΣΤΡΟΦΗ Β

Or it may be my bitter doom  
To stand a handmaid at the loom,  
In distant Athens of supreme renown;  
And weave some wondrous tapestry,  
Or work in bright embroidery,  
Upon the crocus-flowered robe and saffron-coloured  
gown,  
The flying horses wrought in gold,  
The silver chariot onward rolled  
That bears Athena through the Town;  
Or the warring giants that strove to climb  
From earth to heaven to reign as kings,  
And Zeus the conquering son of Time  
Borne on the hurricane's eagle wings;  
And the lightning flame and the bolts that fell  
From the risen cloud at the god's behest,  
And hurled the rebels to darkness of hell,  
To a sleep without slumber or waking or rest.

ANTISTROPH B

Alas! our children's sorrow, and their pain  
In slavery.

Alas! our warrior sires nobly slain  
For liberty.

Alas! our country's glory, and the name  
Of Troy's fair town;  
By the lances and the fighting and the flame  
Tall Troy is down.

I shall pass with my soul over-laden,

To a land far away and unseen,  
For Asia is slave and handmaiden,  
Europa is Mistress and Queen.  
Without love, or love's holiest treasure,  
I shall pass into Hades abhorred,  
To the grave as my chamber of pleasure,  
To death as my Lover and Lord.



TÆDIUM VITÆ







## TAEDIUM VITAE

TO stab my youth with desperate knives, to wear  
This paltry age's gaudy livery,  
To let each base hand filch my treasury,  
To mesh my soul within a woman's hair,  
And be mere Fortune's lackeyed groom,—I swear  
I love it not! these things are less to me  
Than the thin foam that frets upon the sea,  
Less than the thistle-down of summer air  
Which hath no seed: better to stand aloof  
Far from these slanderous fools who mock my life  
Knowing me not, better the lowliest roof  
Fit for the meanest hind to sojourn in,  
Than to go back to that hoarse cave of strife  
Where my white soul first kissed the mouth of sin

## HELAS!

**T**O drift with every passion till my soul  
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,  
Is it for this that I have given away  
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?  
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll  
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday  
With idle songs for pipe and virelay,  
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.  
Surely there was a time I might have trod  
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance  
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God:  
Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod  
I did but touch the honey of romance—  
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?



*HELAS!*







## ON THE RECENT SALE BY AUCTION OF KEATS' LOVE LETTERS

THESE are the letters which Endymion wrote  
To one he loved in secret, and apart.  
And now the brawlers of the auction mart  
Bargain and bid for each poor blotted note,  
Aye! for each separate pulse of passion quote  
The merchant's price. I think they love not art  
Who break the crystal of a poet's heart  
That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat.

Is it not said that many years ago,  
In a far Eastern town, some soldiers ran  
With torches through the midnight, and began  
To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw  
Dice for the garments of a wretched man,  
Not knowing the God's wonder, or His woe?



ON THE RECENT SALE BY AUCTION OF  
KEATS' LOVE LETTERS













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